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Final Period

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You Call This College Food?

I don't recall pesto baguette at my school

By Eleanor Steele

Flash back 30 years. It's Friday and I'm in Cumberland, Maine's Greely High School cafeteria wolfing down fish sticks, mashed potatoes and canned spinach. I'm fuzzy on dessert, but it was something along the lines of mushy, pineapple-upside-down cake. What I do remember clearly was the neon-green, half-inch worm in my spinach. I didn't even complain.

Later, at Adelphi University in New York, my culinary awareness expanded, as did my waistline, as I was introduced to bagels, cream cheese and yogurt. I gained 12 pounds the first semester.

With experiences like these, it should come as a surprise that I was amazed—and envious—when recently two companions and I took in the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of Colby's dining halls.

We arrived in time for lunch and headed straight for Dana Hall. The pleasant cashier told us that for five bucks we could eat all we wanted for as long as we wanted. Large and modern, with gorgeous floor-to-ceiling arched windows affording beautiful campus views, Dana Hall serves about 1,000 students per meal by offering a mostly help-yourself smorgasbord. There were four kinds of pizza, two soups, grilled burgers and hot dogs, a make-your-own sandwich



Students these days expect good food, and at Colby dining halls like Dana (above), they get it.

bar featuring ham, turkey, egg and tuna salads, three cheeses and a variety of breads, two salad bars, and the *piece de resistance*, carved slices of roast beef. We downed bowls of great-tasting chowder and platefuls of salad, accompanied by pizza and turkey sandwiches. For dessert we sampled apple pie, ice cream, soft-serve yogurt and peanut butter and jelly brownies.

We left Dana stuffed to the gills, but while we were impressed by the variety and quantity of food, we had frankly hoped for something a little more exciting.

We found it at Foss Hall. Smaller yet grander, and older but somehow warmer than Dana, it has pink-glowing lanterns that hang on chains from

its high ceiling, and its walls are lined with a double tier of multipaned, arched windows. Long banquet tables stretch across the room in the spirit of communal dining. The soups of the day were cream of mushroom and vegetable with orzo. The salad bar offered, in addition to regular rabbit fare, couscous, organic garbanzo and kidney beans, tofu and fresh tortillas. The luncheon entrees included fried fish fillet, tofu-rice burger, a concoction of carrots, green beans, tomatoes and red peppers over brown rice, and tomato mozzarella pesto baguette. On slate for dinner was a make-your-own stir fry, and, get this, a sign on the wall encouraged students to bring in their own CDs.

With time to kill before dinner we did some research. Students told us that Dana Hall is known for its grilled food, Roberts for its pasta and Foss for its vegetarian slant. Which rules? That depended on whom we asked. All three have ardent admirers.

Five o'clock found us in Roberts Hall, where Oktoberfest was in full swing. Once a month Roberts hosts a "monotony break," which features a theme cuisine. Tonight's was German. For seven dollars we feasted on sauerbraten, stuffed cabbage, creamed Brussel sprouts, beets, and potatoes and noodles smothered in a delicious, ginger-snap gravy, followed by apple strudel and German chocolate cake. We were ready to hibernate.

Recently in Bath, Maine, a high school student, in the midst of a school-wide walkout, climbed a brick pillar and read a list of demands. One was that the cafeteria offer refunds for any food deemed inedible. What's this?, I wondered. Students actually expecting good food? I couldn't help thinking about the worm in my spinach 30 years ago.

After sampling the offerings at Colby's dining halls, I realize that students' expectations aren't the only thing that's changed since I was in school. This food is good.

Eleanor Steele reviews restaurants for the Portland Press Herald.